



# The Battle of Germantown

Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington.

THE Revolutionary War was brought home to Pennsylvania with a vengeance when, on September 26, 1777, a detachment of British troops under Lord Charles Cornwallis occupied Philadelphia. This event climaxed a month-long campaign during which 18,000 British and Hessian soldiers under General William Howe had landed at the northern end of Chesapeake Bay, defeated George Washington's forces at the Battle of Brandywine, and evaded all subsequent American attempts to block their progress toward the American capital. But Howe remained wary of the Americans, who were camped only thirty miles northwest of Philadelphia along Perkiomen Creek between Pencoyd's Mills and Trappe. Accordingly, he put the bulk of his remaining force—some 9,000-10,000 troops—at Germantown, five miles above Philadelphia, covering the likely avenues of approach from Washington's position.

Three such routes converged a short distance south of Germantown. Running close to the banks of the Schuylkill River was the Manatawny, or Ridge, Road. A mile or so to its east was the Germantown Road. About the same distance still farther east was the Skippack Road, which crossed the Bethlehem Pike (connecting at its southern end with the Germantown Road) to intersect northeast of the village with the Old York Road, leading thence to Philadelphia.

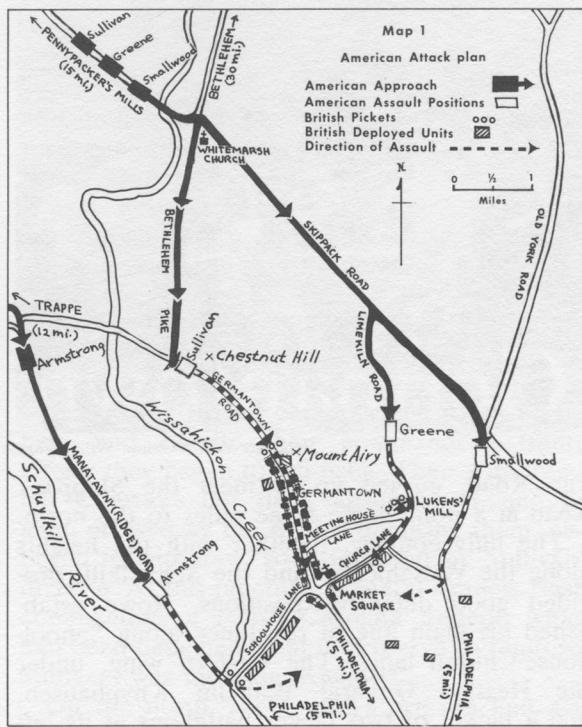
Germantown itself was a two-mile-long hamlet of stone houses from Mount Airy, on the north, along the Germantown Road to an intersection called Market Square. Extending southwest from the Square was Schoolhouse Lane, running a mile and a half to the point where Wissahickon Creek empties through a steep gorge into the Schuylkill. To the east of Market Square, Church Lane stretched another mile and a half to Lukens' Mill, where it converged with Meeting House Lane and, as Lime-

kiln Road, curved up to meet the Skippack Road at a point some three miles to the north.

The hilly country, together with the heights along the Wissahickon and the Schuylkill, provided good defensive positions. Howe established his main line of resistance along Schoolhouse-Church lanes. The western wing, under the Hessian General Wilhelm Knyphausen, had a picket of two Jaeger battalions at its left flank on the high ground above the mouth of the Wissahickon; extending northeastward to Market Square were a Hessian brigade and two British brigades. East of Market Square, under General James Grant, were two more British brigades, two squadrons of dragoons, and the 1st Battalion of the Light Infantry regiment. Farther to the east, covering the Old York Road approach, was a New York Tory unit, the Queen's Rangers. On the Germantown Road at Mount Airy was an outpost consisting of the 2nd Battalion of the Light Infantry, backed up half a mile to its rear by the 40th Regiment of Foot (later designated the Queen's Lancashire Regiment), under Colonel Thomas Musgrave. A detachment of the 1st Battalion of the Light Infantry was posted as a picket near Lukens' Mill. As a reserve, two battalions of the 1st Regiment of Foot Guards (the modern Grenadier Guards) were located near the center of the main line, a little over a mile southeast of Market Square.

On the Perkiomen, the ill-trained Americans were underfed and poorly clothed; many were barefoot; and they had been defeated and outmaneuvered. Nevertheless, their morale was good and they were still full of fight. Accordingly, when Washington learned that numerous detachments had weakened the enemy force at Germantown, he was confident that he could attack it successfully.

The plan he adopted was ambitious, contem-

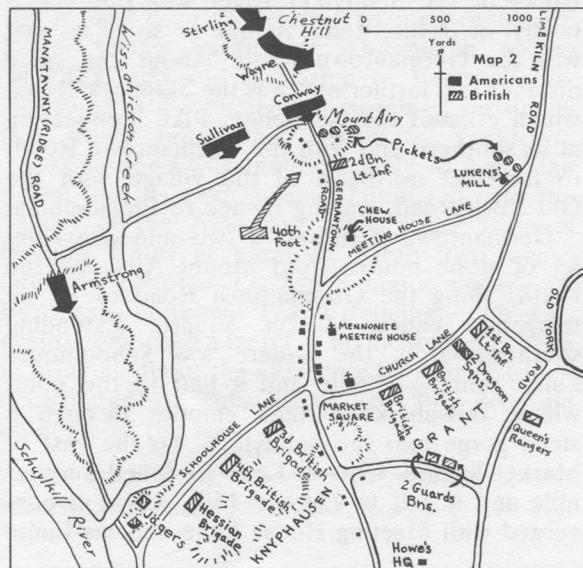


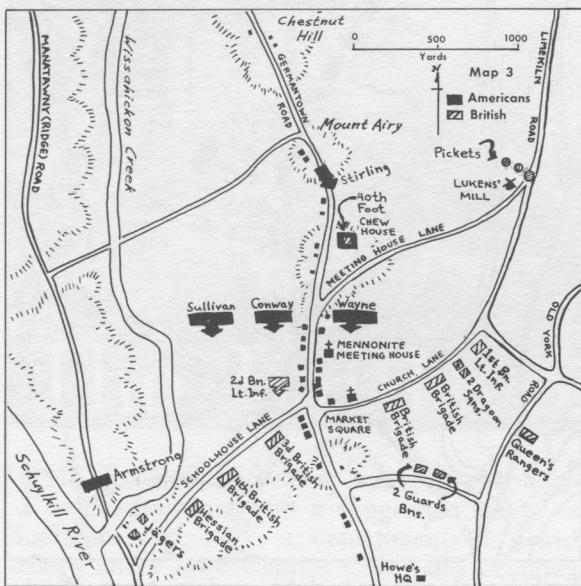
plating a coordinated assault by four separate columns aiming at a double envelopment. (MAP 1) One column, consisting of Pennsylvania militia under General John Armstrong, would move down the Manatawny Road to slip past the Jaegers at the mouth of the Wissahickon to get into the British left rear. Another column, made up of Maryland and New Jersey militia under General William Smallwood, was to proceed down the Skippack Road to the Old York Road, which it was to follow to get behind the British right. General John Sullivan, with the Continental troops of his own division and that of General Anthony Wayne, and followed by the reserve division under General Lord Stirling, would turn south off Skippack Road at Whitemarsh Church and follow the Bethlehem Pike to Chestnut Hill, where he would storm down the Germantown Road against Howe's center. The fourth column, under General Nathanael Greene and comprising Greene's and General Adam Stephen's divisions and General Alexander McDougall's brigade (all Continentals), would follow Smallwood down the Skippack Road as far as Limekiln Road, where it would turn south to hit the British right flank on Church Lane. Washington himself would accompany Sullivan's force. All columns were to reach their jump-off positions (two miles from the British pickets) by 2 A.M. on October 4, halt until 4 A.M., and then start moving forward so as to strike the British outposts simultaneously at 5 A.M. Mount-

ed couriers were to assure coordination of timing between the columns; and for identification in the darkness of early morning, each man was to wear a piece of white paper in his hat.

Sullivan's column made its march without difficulty and was in position on schedule. Time passed, however, and there was no word from the other forces. Unknown to Washington, both Greene and Smallwood had got lost. Smallwood's mission was not particularly significant, and relatively little weight was placed on Armstrong's share of the operation, but Greene's role was vitally important. However, notwithstanding the lack of a report from Greene, Washington assumed that Greene was at his assigned position and at the scheduled time ordered Sullivan to launch his assault.

The leading element of Sullivan's column—General Thomas Conway's brigade—struck the picket at Mount Airy just as the sun was rising. There was a sharp fight, in which the British 40th Foot hurried up to reinforce the Light Infantry battalion, but the Americans drove the enemy before them. (MAP 2) The Light Infantry, running low on ammunition, was covered by Musgrave as it and part of the 40th fell back to Schoolhouse Lane. Musgrave and six of his companies—some 120 men—then found themselves cut off, so they raced to the cover of a nearby stone mansion (its owner, former provincial Chief Justice Benjamin Chew, was in prison in Fredericksburg, Virginia, as a suspected Tory), barricaded its downstairs doors and windows, and manned the upstairs.





By this time, Sullivan's entire column had deployed, with Wayne's division left of the Germantown Road, Conway's brigade extending to its right, and Sullivan's own division still farther to the right. The going over open fields, obstructed by fences and occasional brooks, was not easy. To make matters vastly worse, almost as soon as the sun had risen it was obscured by a dense fog, soon thickened by gunsmoke, so that visibility was severely limited. Nevertheless, the Americans by-passed the strongpoint Musgrave had established and pushed rapidly on toward Market Square. (MAP 3)

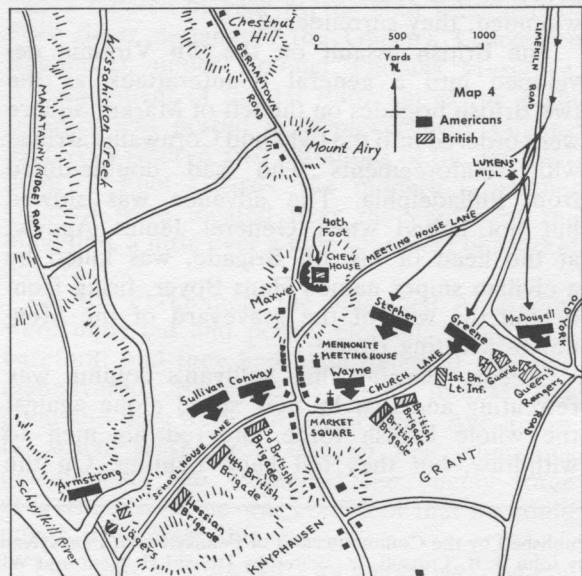
Meanwhile, Armstrong's column had appeared in front of the Jaeger picket at the river. Although this force limited itself to firing a few rounds of light-caliber cannon shot, it did preoccupy the Hessians on Howe's left flank. Toward the center, the British moved into the stone houses along Germantown Road and opened a steady fire on the long line of Sullivan's, Conway's, and Wayne's men. However, the American line pushed on, sweeping resistance before it. Howe saw his defense about to disintegrate, and was beginning to think of ordering his whole army, including the troops in Philadelphia, to retreat to Chester, where he could count on the naval gunfire support of the British fleet in the Delaware.

While this was going on, Washington and his staff had reached the Chew house, where Colonel Musgrave still held out. British sniping from the upstairs windows attracted American attention. After some argument, General Henry Knox convinced Washington that such a threatening strongpoint should no longer be by-passed,

and General William Maxwell's brigade was ordered out of reserve to surround the building.

Lieutenant William Smith went forward toward the house with a surrender demand, but was shot down, mortally wounded, despite the flag of truce he carried. Then field-pieces were brought up to lay a barrage to cover an infantry assault. But the stone walls of the house were proof against the three-pound cannon balls, and the assaulting infantrymen were scythed away by the British fire. Those few who reached the house were bayoneted as they tried to force their way through the doors and windows. Finally, volunteers went forward to try to set fire to the house with bundles of flaming straw, but none survived to reach his goal.

During all this, Greene's column to the north had finally got back on the right road and had made contact with the British picket at Lukens' Mill. Deploying with Stephen's division on the right, Greene's in the center, and McDougall's brigade on the left, it drove in the picket and started rolling up the British right flank. Perhaps because of the fog, and certainly because of the confusing orders Stephen gave (a court-martial later cashiered him for having been drunk), his division veered right from its assigned line of advance and followed Meeting House Lane instead of converging with the rest of Greene's force on Market Square and making contact with Wayne's left flank. Suddenly, dimly through the fog, Stephen's men caught sight of the rear of a deployed line to their left front



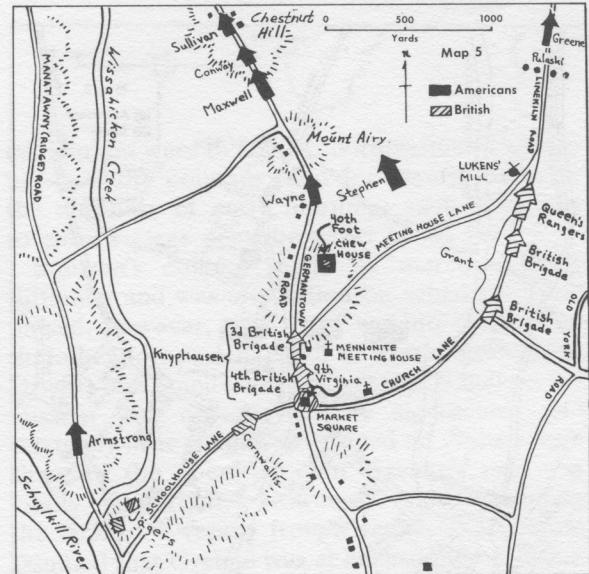
and fired into it. The troops they attacked returned their fire, but began to show signs of confusion. (MAP 4)

And well they might, for these men were not British troops, but Wayne's Continentals. Already running low on ammunition, hearing the outbreak of heavy firing from the Chew house, and being suddenly attacked from the rear, they believed they were about to be cut off. Their assault, which was on the verge of smashing the British center, came to an abrupt halt, and despite their commander's frantic efforts they began to fall back. Their withdrawal left Conway's left flank unsupported, and his men, pressed by the British opposing them, also began to withdraw, soon followed by Sullivan's division. At this juncture, General Francis Nash, commanding a North Carolina brigade which had been detached from the reserve to reinforce Sullivan, was mortally wounded.

On the north, McDougall's brigade had also gone astray, leaving Greene's left flank exposed to an attack by the Queen's Rangers and the Guards of the British reserve. But Greene's division continued its drive down Church Lane. The 9th Virginia, leading the division, burst into Market Square and the men began cheering in triumph. Until this noise gave their presence away, they had been hidden by the fog, but now the British nearby closed in and opened fire. There was a desperate fight for a few minutes. The Virginians suffered heavy casualties; finally, when they were completely surrounded and every officer from the colonel down had been wounded, they surrendered.

The British assault on the 9th Virginia developed into a general counterattack as the two British brigades on the left of Market Square were ordered into the fight and Cornwallis arrived with reinforcements who had double-timed from Philadelphia. The advance was slowed but not halted when General James Agnew, at the head of his 4th Brigade, was killed by a civilian sniper named Hans Boyer, firing from behind the wall of the graveyard of the Mennonite Meeting House.

Greene, learning that Sullivan's column was retreating and that he now stood alone against the whole British force, ordered his men to withdraw, but they fell back fighting. On the



Americans' extreme right, orders from Washington finally sent Armstrong's militia moving to the rear. Smallwood, who had never reached the battlefield, withdrew as well. (MAP 5)

Taking up the pursuit, part of the British moved north after Greene and the rest northwest, following Sullivan's column. On both routes, the pursuit continued for some nine miles, but was called off due to the bad roads and the rear-guard actions organized along the way by Wayne's artillerymen and the cavalry under the Polish volunteer, Count Casimir Pulaski.

There was no panic, but the American troops had had enough. They continued their retreat in good order, halting only when they had passed Perkiomen Creek. They had lost 1,073 officers and men killed, wounded, and missing (the British admitted to 521 officers and men killed and wounded) and they had failed in their objective. But a hard core of determined men remained, to see further fighting at Whitemarsh, to endure the cold and starvation of Valley Forge, and to form the nucleus of sustained resistance that would bring final victory at Yorktown.

Germantown was unquestionably an American defeat, but its near success, combined with the victory of the American army under General Horatio Gates at Saratoga barely two weeks later, on October 17, had a major impact on European thinking. Taken together, the two events comprised a factor of no mean significance in bringing about the alliance with France which contributed so substantially to the eventual outcome of the war.